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## **Governing good, bad and ugly workplaces?**

### **Explaining the paradox of state-steered voluntarism in New Labour's Skills Strategy**

#### **Abstract**

The post-compulsory education and training system in the UK has long been defined as an archetypal voluntarist model. Yet, with the election of a New Labour government in 1997, the relationship between the state as supply-side provider of skills and employers as the demanders of skills began to subtly change. An additional rhetoric emerged in skills policy that suggested a role for the state to shape higher skills demands. This instigated a move towards what is here defined by the oxymoron 'state-steered voluntarism'; an approach to the governance of skills which aimed to deliver both a '*demand-led*' skills system, and a system to '*lead demand*'. Drawing on policy documents and interviews with key policy makers, this article offers an interpretive analysis of New Labour's ideas about the nature of workplaces, and the role of the state and skills providers in response, that explains the existence of policy paradox. We find that New Labour articulated three distinct strategies for governing skills, depending on whether workplaces were perceived to have 'good', 'bad', or frankly 'ugly' skills aspirations. However, whilst this three-fold skills strategy seemingly served the purpose of containing multiple policy objectives and creating a graded role for state action, it was also prone to being used selectively by those with vested interests in UK skills policy (i.e. the representatives of businesses and employers and the representatives of employees and learners).

#### **Introduction**

Contemporary comparative literatures on post-compulsory education and training systems define the UK as an archetypal voluntarist model. A system directed by the private training decisions of economic actors, negotiated within the 'black-box' of the firm (Keep, 2002), and therefore largely driven by the *ad hoc* demands of employers (King, 1997; Brown *et al*, 2001; Page & Hillage, 2006).

Within such a model, the role of the British state in shaping skills provision is largely restricted to managing the supply-side (designing and overseeing the implementation of various initiatives and programmes available to be taken up by employers' should they so wish). A role it has taken on with increasing voracity (Keep, 2006). The stated aim is to ensure providers of education and training align themselves to the demands and preferences of employers', and deliver the

economically valuable skills they require. However, it is a role performed in a political context which provides no incentive nor ascribes any responsibility on employers to exhibit actual demand for skills (Keep & Mayhew, 1996; Gleeson & Keep, 2004). It is this combination of weak voluntary demand for skills, and strong managerial control of supply which has, for many decades, preoccupied the critical literature concerned with the nature of the UK skills system (see for example, Keep, 2005; Keep, 2006; Keep 2007).

However, with the election of a New Labour government in 1997, the relationship between the state as supply-side provider of skills and employers as the putative demanders of skill began to subtly change. Into the context of voluntarism of skills demand and managerialism of skills supply, emerged a new inflection in policy rhetoric that suggested a more interventionist role for the state. A role to shape the skills demands of individuals *and* businesses, directing them towards high(er) skills aspirations. This new inflection instigated a move towards what is here defined by the oxymoron ‘state-steered voluntarism’; an approach to the governance of skills in the UK/England which exhibited a new set of tensions created by the aim to deliver both a ‘*demand-led*’ skills system, and a system to ‘*lead demand*’.

*“We must put employers’ needs for skills centre stage, managing the supply of training, skills and qualifications so that it responds directly to those needs. We must raise ambition in the demand for skill. We will only achieve increased productivity and competitiveness if more employers and more employees are encouraged and supported to make the necessary investment in skills” (DfES, 2003:8, emphasis added)*

Indeed, it is this emphasis on government responding to demand while, at the same time, seeking to raise demand that is the source of what may be seen as a paradox in English skill formation.

This article seeks to explain the source and cause of this paradox, by considering the purpose of deliberate policy ambiguity. It asks the question: ‘How did New Labour seek to steer skill formation, and with what implications?’ Following this introduction, section two begins with a discussion of two different conceptual approaches to the analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy. Having established that New Labour’s skills policy for England advocated the importance of a demand-led education and training system, it contrasts accounts that offer ‘policy failure’ as an explanation of the fate of New Labour’s project to lead demand, with accounts of deliberate policy

ambiguity to achieve multiple goals and objectives. As such, this section develops the framework for analysis. Section three then presents the analysis in detail. It draws out how skills policy under New Labour was described in policy documents and by senior policy-makers. Further divided into three sub-sections, it identifies New Labour's three skills strategies. In each case illustrating how the state imagines employer and employee skill aspiration and behaviour, and describes the processes and practices of skill delivery accordingly. The fourth section concludes by bringing together these three skills strategies, to explain policy paradox as a consequence of the attempt at differentiated steering of workplaces in order to achieve different state projects associated with the better economic and social functioning of the nation. Finally, beyond its contribution to understanding how skill formation in England was governed by New Labour, the article begins to expose the weaknesses of state-steered voluntarism as a mode of changing workplace behaviour.

### **Conceptualising New Labour's approach to governing skills: policy failure vs. policy ambiguity**

While claiming to be 'demand-led' (driven by the economic needs and preferences of businesses' and individuals'), the education and training system in England has become increasingly directed (designed and managed) by the state (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Keep, 2006). The idea that the state should control the supply of skills in order to respond to employer demand is inherent to a state-constructed utilitarian 'new vocationalism' agenda, that insists on the need for education and training to better align itself with the imagined high(er) skills requirements of the economy, but does not challenge the voluntarism of private decisions to train. The limitation of this approach to tackling the national low skills problem is that it fails to acknowledge the low demand for higher levels of skills among employers (Keep & Mayhew, 1996; Huddleston & Keep, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Keep, 2005; Keep, 2012).

Despite Finegold & Soskice's (1988) explicit identification of a particular institutionalised 'two-way' relationship between demand and supply producing low-skills equilibrium in Britain (see also Wilson & Hogarth, 2003), periodic resurgence of concern over skill levels has tended to frame the problem as an issue of deficient supply (Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Keep, 2002; Keep, 2012). Indeed, the apparent historic failures of skills supply have been condemned by successive governments as the principal cause of the UK's comparative productivity and competitiveness gap,

as well as persistent labour market inequalities and insecurities (Huddleston & Keep, 1999; Lloyd & Payne, 2002).

Given that the concept of low skills equilibrium has typically been framed in such a way, we can easily expect the high(er) skills project of New Labour to be conceptualised, first and foremost, as a 'demand-led' strategy. However, the question of how we can properly account for the inflection in skills policy rhetoric that demand is to be led by the state remains. The answer can perhaps be found by considering old policy afflictions in new economic and social contexts, which have once again reinvigorated calls to urgently address the problem of low skills.

Throughout successive New Labour administrations the critical need for higher skills occupied a pivotal position at the forefront of economic and social policy and policy debate. Fuelled by concerns about the competitive strength of the nation in a dynamic and technologically advance knowledge-based global economy<sup>1</sup>(Avis *et al*, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 1996; Aston & Green, 1996; Brown, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001; Crouch *et al*, 2004), higher skills were fervently depicted as fundamental to sustaining business productivity and individual employability, and, therefore, as critical to enhancing national economic prosperity and ensuring (a particularly defined version of) distributive justice (Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Crouch *et al*, 2004; Pring, 2004; Hodgson *et al*, 2008; Keep *et al*, 2008; Payne, 2008).

Given this economic context, we could wonder whether the inflection in the New Labour Skills Strategy that demand is to be led by the state represented a new logic of possibility for governing high(er) skills. Did it signal the start of a new state-market relationship, and mean that the explicit lack of responsibility ascribed to employers' was to be addressed? If so, how can we account for an enduring commitment to a 'demand-led' strategy, and an ideological preference for voluntarism?

The dominant answer arrived at by existing analysis is that the demand leading aspects of the New Labour Skills Strategy amounted to '**policy failure**'. Although for some skills policy scholars and commentators the election of New Labour was cause for guarded optimism (Brown & Lauder, 1996), over time this optimism dissipated and their analysis identified a 'rhetoric vs. reality' gap (Keep, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Payne, 2008). Just like successive governments before, New

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<sup>1</sup> The skill of the workforce has become associated with the capacity to adapt to and utilise new technologies, and adapt to and implement new forms of production, systems of work organisation, and ways of working (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003:106 also Aston & Green, 1996)

Labour in office were shown to lack the willingness and ability to meaningfully intervene in the private training decisions of employers (Brown, 1999; Keep, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Coffield, 2002; Lloyd & Payne, 2003; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Keep, 2006; Keep *et al*, 2008). The 'tenacity of voluntarism' (King, 1997), it was said, had once again trumped all other agendas, and in doing so had hollowed-out any putative commitment to tackling the demand-side of the UK's skills problem. Furthermore, the retained insistence on the need to ensure a 'demand-led' system was seen as enabling employers to extend their claim to 'rights' over the shape and trajectory of skills policy (Gleeson & Keep, 2004). Rights which came at a considerable cost to other stakeholders and to wider social concerns about the form and functioning of the labour market (Avis *et al*, 1996; Coffield, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Ball, 2008), and which again left government trying to raise skill levels by managing suppliers with an increasing iron grip (Grugulis *et al*, 2004; Keep, 2006; Wolf, 2007).

In essence, the conclusions about New Labour being drawn here return us to where we started; to the recognition that skills policy in England suffers from the contradiction of managing education and training in service to the imagined high(er) skills needs of the economy, without challenging voluntarism as the cause of the low skills equilibrium and the source of low demand for skills. However, the limitation of this analysis is that whilst it can explain why policy stipulations that appeared to take seriously the intention to tackle the demand for skill failed, this is not the same as accounting for the very existence of such policy concerns in the first place. Indeed, in the last instance, such explanations tend to resort to writing-off this tension and smoothing out the contradiction it implies.

In contrast, the intention here is to explain the existence of a paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. In doing so, we argue that 'policy failure' does not provide an adequate explanation of the co-existence and consequence of both demand-led and demand-leading rhetoric in the New Labour Skills Strategy. Instead, we draw on approaches to the analysis of state projects that allow for the possibility of deliberate **policy ambiguity**, by illuminating the disparate discourses and objectives that give meaning and substance to governing strategies, and the unstable relations between them (Stone, 2012; Clarke, 2004:5).

For Fairclough (2000:44), ambiguity was characteristic of the New Labour project. It was inherent to their insistence on the 'reconciliation of opposites' through the presentation of a 'Third Way'

that sought to remove (the perception of) conflicts within or between governing strategies (see also Newman, 2001; Hyland, 2002). Ambiguity reflects the possibility that “states might be more than one thing at once” (Clarke, 2004:2); may have more than one type of agenda; in relation to more than one type of imagined subject (Clarke, 2005). It reflects a state, with regard to skills policy, which was engaged in attempts to forge coherence between what Avis (1998:261) identifies as “remnants of earlier radical movements” (a residual commitment to old Labour’s concern with the management of the nation’s economic security and distributive social justice) and neoliberal convictions regarding the supremacy of market mechanisms for getting things done (Grugulis *et al*, 2004; Ball, 2007:10).

In understanding political projects as defined by ‘ambiguity’, Newman & Clarke (2009:8-9) offer the concepts of “articulation” and “assemblage” to aid analysis of policy puzzles. They use the concept of articulation to denote the way in which ideas (for example, about how skills should be produced in relation to economic and social needs and preferences) are mobilised and recruited in order to forge persuasive projects, and subvert, silence and close down opposition and alternatives (Newman & Clarke, 2009:8-9; see also Newman, 2007; Ball 2007; Ball, 2008 for a discussion of the role of discourse in the production of meaningful political projects). They use the concept of assemblage to express and give visibility to the work that the state does to coordinate and align all the constitutive elements of the project - the types of employers and employees that constitute the subjects of policy, the form and function of the state, and the policies and practices for achieving the goals of the project - to shape an apparently coherent strategy (Newman & Clarke, 2009:9).

Of course, the relationship between how particular projects are articulated and assembled is iterative. Following Carmel & Papadopoulos (2003), we draw attention to the need to appreciate the mutually reinforcing dynamic that exists between the articulated logics, rationales and principles of public policies (what is to be governed), and the modes and mechanisms of governing that organise who is to be governed, how, and with what effects. This conceptual approach to understanding how states govern is useful in the context of studying skills policy, as it can distinguish the normative and meaningful logics that gave the New Labour Skills Strategy its inflection to be both demand-led and to lead demand, and can show how this obvious tension was perceived as reconcilable within the high(er) skills project.

Having discussed the limitations of extant skills policy analysis to account for the existence of policy paradox, and having outlined a conceptual approach that can be applied to (indeed insists upon) such an endeavour, the paper proceeds by identifying and explaining the ambiguity of skills policy rhetoric under New Labour. It offers an interpretive analysis of policy narrative. In line with the conceptual approach adopted, we start from the premise that policy is bounded political communication - not a one-off statement or directive, but a reinforced, re-inked and reworked interactive momentum of discursively mediated ideas, decisions and actions (Ball, 2008:7) – to influence ways of understanding the world and the problems and solutions contained within it. Following Stone (2012), we understand the project of making policy to involve ‘political reasoning’, defined as “strategic portrayal [of a situation] for persuasion’s sake and, ultimately, for policy’s sake” (*ibid*:12). We trace the occurrence, reoccurrence and concurrence of ideas through New Labour skills policy, and use interpretative and discursive coding techniques to “demonstrate that politics and policy are grounded in subjective factors” (Fischer, 2003:14). As such, our aim is to reveal the ideas about workplaces, and the role of the state and skills providers as a response, that animated the New Labour Skills Strategy, and that explains the existence of policy paradox.

The arguments advanced draw on analysis of seventeen core policy documents produced by New Labour administrations between 2001 and 2008<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix 1). Notwithstanding the differences between the types of documents<sup>3</sup>, the analysis is able to trace the existence of multiple, different and co-existing policy narratives employed throughout the period, which gave meaning to the way in which New Labour understood the problem of, and solution to, low skills. As is highlighted by the quote in the introduction, these multiple, different and co-existing narratives can appear in policy documents in very close proximity to each other (see also Wolf, 2007 for a discussion of the contradictory nature of the Leitch Review of Skills).

The documentary analysis is supported by four in-depth interviews with key policy-makers (a member of the House of Commons, a member of the House of Lords and two senior civil servants from the then Departments of Education and Skills) operating at the epicentre of Skills Strategy development at the time, and a number of relevant speeches by Ministers. The interviews were

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<sup>2</sup> Although New Labour defined their Skills Strategy for England as commencing with the publication of the ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising Our Potential – Individuals, Employers, Nation’ White Paper (2003), the review of relevant documents includes important agenda setting reports published prior to this.

<sup>3</sup> It is noted that the 2001 PIU Report – “In Demand – Adult Skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” – particularly emphasises that skill is a derived demand, and therefore that economic policy needs to incentivise and support businesses to raise their demand for skills.



conducted with the explicit aim of offering explanation of the main tensions identified through documentary analysis, and as such are used to develop the conclusions. Particular analytical focus was placed on interpreting the different discursive constructions of workplaces in policy - distinguished by the nature of their demand for skills and their skills behaviour - and the effect of these for the ordering of relations between workplaces and the state and the organising of skills provision.

### **New Labour's three skills strategies**

The analysis presented below shows that New Labour imagined and described three different types of workplaces that exhibited different degrees of high(er) skills aspiration. In relation to these different workplaces, it is argued that three distinct strategies for governing skills can be extricated from within policy. The sections that follow take each of these in turn. They reveal how imagined workplaces (implying different relationships between employers and employees), the form and function of the state in response, and the corresponding practices and processes of skill delivery are assembled into distinct architectures of high(er) skills governance, in relation to particular state projects to 'empower', 'enhance' or 'emancipate' correct skills behaviour. As such, the analysis argues that the part of the New Labour Skills Strategy that insists demand for skills is to be led by the state should not be written off, but rather we should consider the consequences of the deliberate ambiguity of policy in pursuit of multiple co-existing goals. The analysis illuminates New Labour's approach to the governance of skills as distinguishing between discursively constructed good, bad and frankly ugly workplaces, and, therefore, as instigating a move towards state-steered voluntarism. The implication of such an approach to governing skills is discussed.

#### ***Responsible workplaces, the empowering state and the demand-led skills strategy***

The first of three distinct skills strategies for England under New Labour was aimed at imagined '**responsible workplaces**'. New Labour policy narratives described a particular type of employer and employee - interacting at the site of the workplace - that understood on-going business and

employment success (productivity and employability) as exclusively dependent on the pursuit of high(er) skills.

‘Enlightened employers’ were spoken *about* and spoken *for* as understanding that their survival and future prosperity would be fundamentally determined by having a better skilled workforce (Strategy Unit, 2002:2; UKCES, 2008a:3; DIUS, 2008b:4). Indeed, policy-makers explicitly presented desire and pressure for more and better skills as emanating from the bottom-up (Denham, 2007). These enlightened employers were neither indifferent to, nor sceptical of, the benefits of skills, and were not prepared to leave skills development to chance, or rely on reactive poaching strategies (Policy-maker 3).

*“I think we’ve past that stage where employers say ‘oh I don’t want my staffed trained’, you know, ‘I’ll go and head hunt from somewhere else if I want a skilled person’. I think most employers really do see that it’s their responsibility to help us [upskill].” (Policy-maker 4)*

Equally, ‘motivated employees’ were spoken *about* and spoken *for* as understanding their current employment security, as well as their future employment opportunities, to be dependent on the attainment of high(er) skills (DfES, 2005a:6; DIUS, 2008a:3). As such, policy-makers’ were again able to present the desire and pressure for more and better skills as emanating from the bottom-up; from responsible and ambitious individuals actively seeking the advantages of further training (Denham, 2007).

*“Most people [...] if you talk to them, to learners or to prospective learners, [...] what they want is the qualification at the end of it so they can go and get a good job. So in a way they are the easiest of our stakeholders, because they’re on the same wave length as the policy.” (Policy-maker 4)*

In describing desire for more and better skills as emanating from enlightened business and motivated individuals, policy-makers presented a consensus around skills enhancement (Leitch, 2006). Together, at the site of the imagined responsible workplace, employers and employees were conceptualised and narrated as partners in the high(er) skills vision. In response, policy narratives presented government as having an obligation to support the progressive skills ambitions of businesses and individuals. However, by defining skill as the manoeuvrability to cope

with the so-thought complexity of a dynamic economy, policy-makers presented any attempt to centrally plan skills needs as inherently problematic (PIU, 2001; DfES, 2005a).

Keen to distance the state from any role in ‘picking winners’, policy-makers described this strategy as *“getting on for tactically neutral”* (Policy-maker 3), and afforded a privileged status to the interests of enlightened businesses and motivated individuals (Policy-maker 1). Indeed, business and individual investment in training was deemed only to be secured by ensuring that they were ‘empowered’ to direct the skills project and product in accordance with their own motivations (Leitch, 2006: 48; see also DIUS, 2007a; DfES, 2005a). This depiction of an **empowering role for the state** to meet responsible private skills aspirations had corresponding implications for the way in which the institutional arrangements for skilling were considered best organised.

Policy-makers presented a highly critical analysis of the hitherto ‘supply-led’ system. Described as a fallacious attempt to *“predict and provide”* (Leitch, 2006:48), it was considered to have resoundingly failed to meet the need for economically valuable skills. Specifically, policy-makers’ criticised past policies for being blindly focused on *“process rather than product”* (Policy-maker 2). Creating conditions, and enabling them to remain unchecked, in which self-serving funding bodies and colleges benefited from filling courses regardless of their utility for businesses and individuals (DfES, 2003:19; Policy-maker 3)<sup>4</sup>.

To overcome these problems, policy-makers proposed new, as well as restructured, institutions of skills delivery, obliged to *“adapt and respond”* (Leitch, 2006:69) to the requirements of enlightened employers and motivated employees as ‘customers’ (Strategy Unit, 2002:2; DfES, 2003:35; DIUS, 2007a:11). Specifically, policy-makers emphasised the importance of giving employers and employees ‘voice and choice’, to put them and their needs in the *“driving seat”* (DfES, 2006:35; DfES, 2005a:11) of a **demand-led system** (DIUS, 2007a; DIUS, 2007b)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Leitch (2006:12) reported that less than 10% of employer training is conducted in further education colleges, and interprets this as evidence that employers and employees – despite their enlightened and motivated skills aspirations - have become alienated from engagement with the publically-funded institutions of training and learning (Leitch, 2006:48).

<sup>5</sup> In general, policy-makers spoke of the need to *“strengthen the employer voice”* (Leitch, 2006:71; DIUS, 2007a:36). However, the privileging of employer voice was justified as simultaneously the best way to ensure valuable training and learning opportunities for (potential) employees, by imagining employers as acting in ways that secure improved production strategies and therefore improved employment prospects (DfES, 2006:22). The term ‘demand-led’ was therefore often, but not exclusively, synonymous with ‘employer-led’.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) - established to “*champion the development of an effective and more demand-led skills and employment system across the UK*” (UKCES, 2009a:6) – was described as being ‘employer-led’ (UKCES, 2010:5). Equally, the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)<sup>6</sup> were described as set up to “*build a skills system that is driven by employer demand*” (UKCES, 2008a:4). In practice, policy-makers sought to give the term ‘employer-led’ meaning through the prescription that ‘eminent business leaders’ should have active and influential roles on the boards of organisations responsible for the implementation of skills policy (DIUS, 2007a:36; DIUS, 2008b:9). Indeed, for SSCs the critical test, upon which their very continuation was dependent (UKCES, 2008a:5), was their ability to “*command powerful support from industry*” (UKCES, 2008b:13).<sup>7</sup>

However, all organisations within the institutional framework of skills delivery - both those newly established under the auspices of the New Labour Skills Strategy, and those that pre-existed this policy era - were (re)described as directed by the voice of employers’ and employees’. In particular, skills providers (following the Foster Review (2005) of the future role of Further Education Colleges) were described as having a core requirement to engage with, and enhance their understanding of, employers’ workforce skills needs, and (re)focus their activity accordingly (DIUS, 2007a:7).

The other important dimension to the remaking of businesses and individuals as skills ‘customers’ was illuminated in the way policy-makers narrated practices of increased choice. Again, when policy-makers promoted the need for greater priority to be given to the choices of customers, they drew specifically on their conceptualisation of businesses as ‘enlightened’ and individuals as ‘motivated’; reemphasising the concordance of interests in high(er) skills, such that the national Skills Strategy was presented as principally functioning to liberate responsible private progressive aspirations (Policy-maker 3).

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<sup>6</sup> SSCs were established to replace the 73 former National Training Organisations. They were introduced in phases, initially licensed from 2003 to 2006, and relicensed and rationalised a number of times since. According to the UKCES (2008a:13; 2011) and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC) the network achieved approximately 90% coverage of workforce activity across the UK economy.

<sup>7</sup> SSCs underwent periodic relicensing, which involved audit and inspection of their functions undertaken by the UKCES with involvement from the National Audit Office. The 2008-2009 relicensing process principally focused on the degree to which the SSCs had achieved ‘employer engagement’.

To promote the exercise of choice, policy-makers extolled the virtues of mechanisms designed to boost the ‘purchasing power’ of both employers and employees, and contrasted them with what they described as the “*you’ll-get-what-you’re-given*” (Policy-maker 4) approach to determining the training and learning offer available under a supply-led system. In policy documents, SSCs were charged to work with the businesses in their footprint to develop Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) - described by policy-makers as a means of setting out the skills priorities of the sector - and establish a Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) that reflected the skills employers, and therefore employees, find valuable (Leitch, 2006:74; DfES, 2006:22). In addition, policy advocated the benefits of routing significant proportions of the adult learning budget through Train to Gain, and Individual Skills Accounts.

The Train to Gain service was introduced in 2006, and offered employers free or subsidised training for their lower skilled employees<sup>8</sup> and brokerage to support them in translating their skills needs into relevant and sourced packages of study and qualification for their workforce (DfES, 2006:40; LSC, 2007:3; DIUS, 2007a:56). Policy-makers claimed that the most important feature of Train to Gain was ensuring that funding for training and learning followed employer demand; describing this new process as a change for the better to the “*balance of power*” (Policy-maker 3) between customers and suppliers. Individual Skills Accounts<sup>9</sup> were described as providing a mechanism for empowering individuals in exercising choices. Policy-makers claimed that they represented a kind of virtual funding (DIUS, 2007a:27) that followed the individual learner, and, it was asserted, enabled individuals to more freely select between types of provision and providers.

Taken together, both the voice-led institutions and the choice-led policy mechanisms were narrated by policy-makers as empowering. They were described as designed by government to improve the responsiveness of the skills system to its customers, and as galvanising engagement with, and investment in, economically valuable skills training.

*“The advent of Skills Accounts and the growth of Train to Gain herald a radically different model of organisation of the skills system, where the role of Government is to ensure that*

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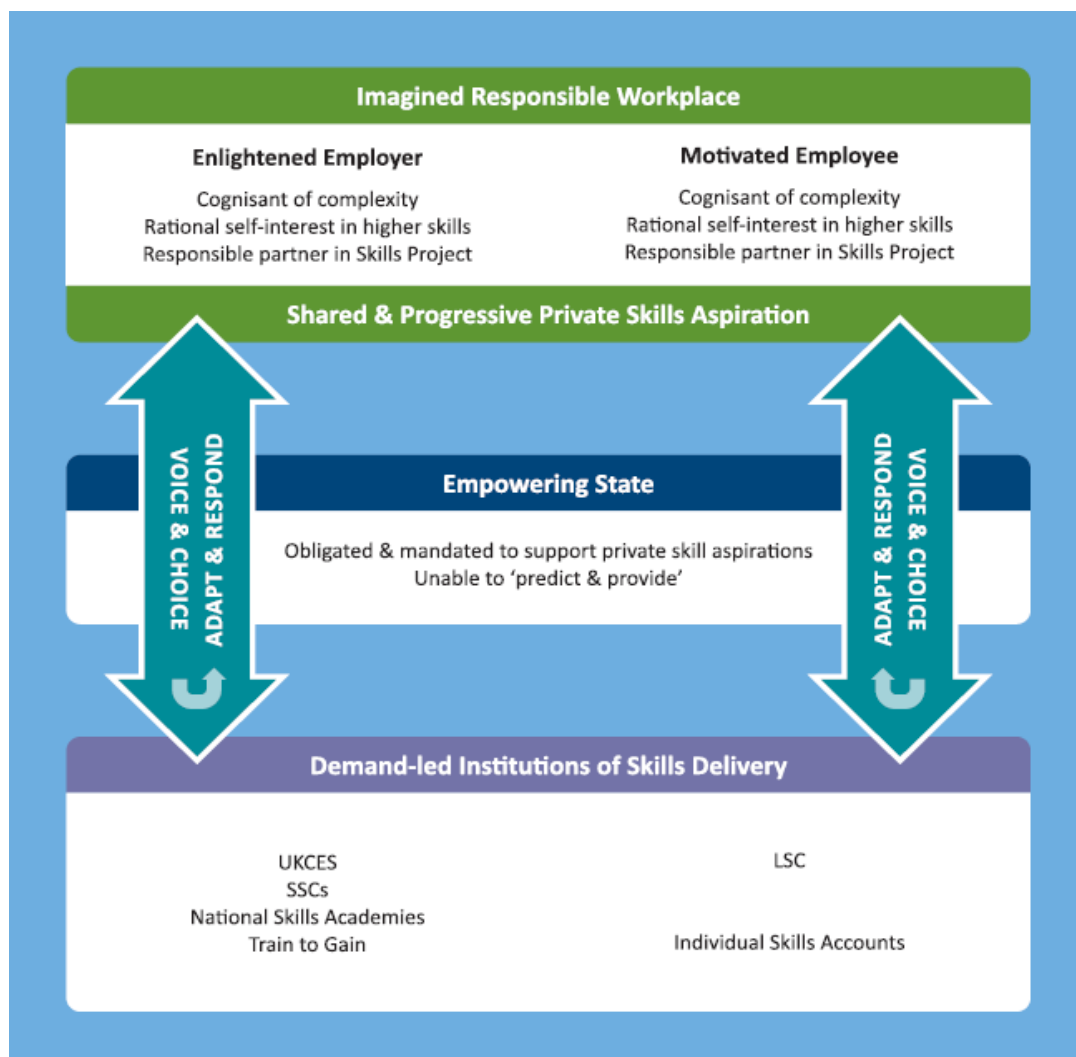
<sup>8</sup> The New Labour Government introduced a new entitlement to a free first full NVQ level 2 qualification and, in specific cases, a free or subsidised NVQ level 3 qualification. Employers could access this entitlement via Train to Gain to fund training for their low skilled employees

<sup>9</sup> Learner Accounts were one of the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) piloted in 2007/08 and rolled out across England in 2010.

*customers are empowered, well-informed and well-supported, so that demand can lead supply". (DCSF/DIUS, 2008:11)*

In summary, running through this element of New Labour's skills policy was a distinct 'demand-led' strategy. Starting from a particular articulation of how the parties in the skills project behave, and the relationships between them – responsible workplaces - the corresponding response of the state and the form of skill delivery was assembled into an order and system of organisation that amounted to a particular governmental agenda to empower economic competitiveness and social prosperity. It is summarised below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The demand-led strategy for skills**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

The demand-led strategy represents one strand of state work to describe one version of the workplace and the role of the state and the skills system in response. However, this was not New Labour's only strategy to tackle the problem of low skills in England. From within the so-thought 'coherent' Skills Strategy for England (Foreword by Tony Blair – PIU, 2001:3), two further distinct skills strategies can be explicated. What underpins these additional architectures of skill governance is the reconstruction through policy rhetoric of different workplaces that operate without the necessary skill aspiration to mitigate dynamic economic uncertainty. In such workplaces, the problem of low skills was re-described by policy-makers as the consequence of lack of skills demand. We will firstly turn our attention to the description of imagined 'inert' workplace.

### ***Inert workplaces, the enhancing state and the strategy to lead demand***

*"We have committed to joining the worlds 'premier league' for skills. This will require an enormous shift in attitudes and aspirations [...]. For the Government, it means adopting a much more positive approach [...]. It means encouraging people to raise their aspirations for themselves." (DIUS, 2007a:3)*

Despite overwhelming pressures to up-rate their production and employment strategies, New Labour policy rhetoric described workplaces that exhibited deficient skills ambitions (DIUS, 2007a:38). Imagined as principally suffering from a lack of capacity and capability to rethink and upgrade their skills attainment and utilisation, these workplaces were presented as unable to act in their own best interests. In other words, they were imagined as trapped in a short-termist low skills equilibrium (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Wilson & Hogarth, 2003).

This image of '**inert workplaces**' was particularly exposed where policy presented and lamented past failures to embrace the potential of skills. Although in general policy-makers' narratives tended to place blame for the national skills deficit with an imagined ossified and self-serving supply-led system, employer risk aversion (PIU, 2001:34), compounded by poor strategic management (Leitch, 2005:5) in a voluntarist system, was described as contributing to the problem. Contradicting the portrayal of 'enlightened' businesses as actively engaged in the up-skilling of their low skilled workforce, a co-existing counter-narrative in policy presented a different type of employer, engaged in low skills product market and production strategies, as realising negligible returns from lower levels of training (Leitch, 2006:92; Policy-maker 4).

Policy rhetoric also presented an image of 'inert' individuals; equally described as less able to respond to the pressure to skill, and thereby enhance their employability in an uncertain and competitive labour market. Essentially this image encapsulated policy-makers articulation of low skills demand amongst low-skilled, low-paid employees, stuck in a trap of low skills ambition. What Gordon Brown MP – then Prime Minister - referred to as *"inequalities in aspiration"* (Brown, 2007). Specifically, low-skilled individuals were presented as experiencing barriers to training and learning that extended from low confidence (PIU, 2001:93; Leitch, 2006:106) and blocked their motivation to train (Leitch, 2006:103).

*"I don't believe it is just the highly skilled; the wealthy; the well-educated who respond to incentives. I think everybody does that. But I think there is a resistance which is often borne out of inadequacy. I think it's a fear of failure; it's a fear of this isn't quite for me." (Policy-maker 2)*

Whilst imagined 'responsible' workplaces were met by an 'empowering' state, the depiction of 'inert' workplaces seemed to call into question the validity of leaving skills decisions to the whim of private interest. As such, policy-makers constructed and described an additional, inherently more interventionist role for the state; and in doing so they claimed to be setting the New Labour Administration apart from disinterested governments of the past.

*"We've accepted that the market isn't perfect. And the way the market articulates demand - employers articulate demand - will not be perfect, and it will not meet all our sort of strategic needs. So you arrive at the conclusion that you do need, as government, to do something about it, or enable things to happen." (Policy-maker 3)*

At the same time as stipulating that government should be *"empowering people and employers to make the right training decisions for themselves"* (Leitch, 2006:48), the role of the state was described in a co-existing but counter-narrative as 'encouraging' a changed workplace culture (PIU; 2001:53; HM Treasury, 2002:22; DfES, 2003:8; Brown, 2007; UKCES, 2010:5; Policy-maker 1). Whilst still declining to define the skills sought in substantive terms, what policy-makers presented was their discursively constructed right to define and communicate an aspirational vision for the



nation<sup>10</sup> (PIU, 2001:61; Leitch, 2006:3; Brown, 2007). Their aim was presented quite simply as quantitatively more and higher skills. The ambitious targets set were described as a vehicle to communicate greater skill expectation (DIUS, 2007a:4), and as serving to direct and shape a sense of responsibility for the pursuit of betterment among employers and employees. Their rhetoric sought to normalise the requirement to excel beyond acceptance of low skills, and, as such, to be transformative and performative of the progressive skills behaviours required. Thus, whilst a partnership discourse remained present and critical in the policy narrative, given the role for an **‘enhancing’ state** the relations between the partners were fundamentally reordered. This policy rhetoric placed government squarely at the head of the partnership table, in a position to set and monitor the direction of travel for others to embrace and follow.

This reordering of relations within the ‘skills partnership’ had significant ramifications for the way in which the role of skills providers was portrayed. Although still described as being ‘demand-led’, the demand that led the system was also articulated in policy as to be encouraged, rather than existing. Although still described as a ‘new approach’ to workplace skills delivery, providers were reoriented from ‘responding’ towards ‘initiating’ change (PIU, 2001:55; DCSF/DIUS, 2008:12) through the depiction of a **system to lead demand**.

*“I think it is about giving people the opportunity, and managing the opportunity to change the way you are towards what is there for you. And the government has got to be able to make sure [...] that those opportunities are there to change.” (Policy-maker 1)*

In short, providers of skills were recast as leaders rather than followers in the Skills Strategy for England. Required to actively communicate rather than passively listen, and with a role to *“try and win over hearts and minds about the benefits of skills”* (Policy-maker 1).

The UKCES – which in relation to imagined ‘responsible’ workplaces was described as exclusively employer-led - was also tasked with *“the job to say what the nation needs”* (Policy-maker 4); to communicate the skills ambition out to businesses, with the intention to *“promote employer*

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<sup>10</sup>New Labour established a commitment (in England) to meeting a series of higher-level qualification attainment goals, originally recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:3), and that came to be known as the ‘2020 ambition’ (DIUS, 2007a:9) These goals included 95% of adults to achieve basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy; more than 90% of adults qualified to NVQ level 2 or above; 1.9 million more adults to achieve an NVQ level 3 qualification; and 40% or more adults to achieve an NVQ level 4 qualification or above.

*investment in people and the better use of their skills at all levels*" (DIUS, 2007a:38). In short, in relation to the imaginary of inert workplaces, the UKCES was described as required to take on the altered role of *"driving forward the skills agenda"* (Alan Johnson, MP cited in DCSF, 2007).

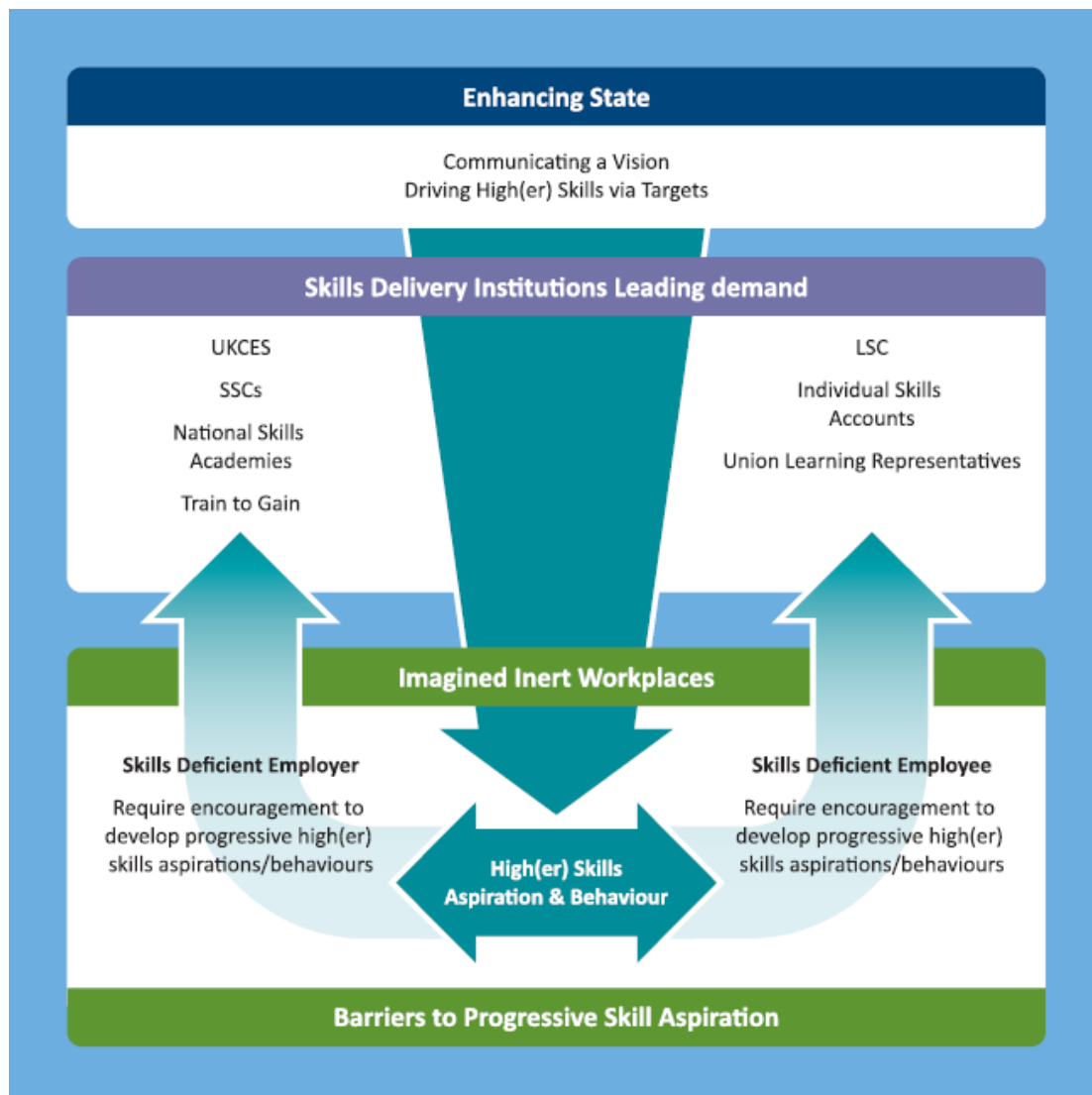
The SSCs – also described as exclusively employer-led in relation to imagined responsible workplaces – were cast to *"take a leading role"* (Leitch, 2006:18), and to *"raise employer ambition and investment in skills"* (DIUS, 2007a:36). To champion, motivate and support engagement with education and training within their sector (HM Treasury, 2002:16; Leitch, 2006:74; UKCES, 2008a; UKCES, 2008b). To set 'hard' skills attainment targets for employers to deliver against (Leitch, 2006:79), and require employers to clearly set out their commitment to participate in up-skilling their workforce in the SSAs.

The role of brokerage as part of the Train to Gain offer was likewise remade. Described in relation to 'inert' workplaces as functioning to *"encourage employers to see the benefit of higher skills"* (DfES, 2005b:7). Similarly, policy-makers repositioned providers of Further Education (predominantly FE Colleges) as required to *"achieve demanding targets [...] persuading more employers of the value [of these qualifications] to them"* (Denham, 2007). Essentially, policy-makers envisaged a role for the FE sector to *"increase the demand [for skills] from employers and potential learners"*, by addressing *"the cultural, social and economic factors which can limit aspiration and participation"* (DfES, 2006:36; also Leitch, 2006:116). Individual Skills Accounts were, in response to inert employees, reconceptualised as a mechanism to 'energise' learning, and Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) advisors were re-tasked with an active role - based on *"reaching out, rather than waiting for people to come"* (Leitch, 2006:109) - to raise people's awareness of their skills deficiencies (Leitch, 2006:110), and *"steer"* them to the courses that would best meet their needs (DfES, 2006:37).

In summary, what is exposed is an additional policy narrative that significantly reconstructs the role of the skills delivery system in response to the image of inert workplaces and an enhancing role of the state. A narrative that depicted the need for a skills delivery system and set of policy tools to encourage employers and employees to raise their skills aspirations by leading skills demand. This strategy is based on an alternative articulation of how the parties in the skills project behave, and the relationships between them, assembled into an order and system of organisation that represents a distinctly different governmental agenda; to enhance concern for economic

competitiveness and social prosperity, and raise demand for skills. It is summarised below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: The strategy for leading demand for skills**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

Again, however, this is not the only way in which the New Labour constructed and responded to an imagined problem of low demand for skills. We now consider the second of the more negatively imagined workplaces – ‘irresponsible’ workplaces – and the co-existing strategy to mitigate or circumvent lack of demand.

***Irresponsible workplaces, an exhorting/emancipating state, and the strategy to mitigate or circumvent lack of demand***

This final section of the empirical analysis describes the way in which policy rhetoric constructed **‘irresponsible’ businesses or ‘irresponsible’ individuals** as not only lacking requisite high(er) skills aspirations, but that furthermore demonstrated a deviant lack of interest in skills improvement. In general, policy-makers’ narratives tended to juxtapose skills deviant businesses and disempowered and vulnerable individuals, and skills deviant individuals and disempowered and vulnerable businesses.

Policy-makers presented images of the *“bad boss”* (PIU, 2001:34) alongside images of the vulnerable employee, left behind as a consequence of being *“trapped in a cycle of low-skilled, poorly-paid, often short-term employment with few training opportunities”* (DIUS, 2007a:22). Drawing on survey data, in particular the National Employer Skills Survey (NESS), policy documents made repeated reference to an identified one-third of firms (35%) that had no training budget, persistently did no training at all, and ‘condemned’ eight million employees to go without training at the workplace (Leitch, 2006:12; DIUS, 2007a:37; DIUS, 2008b:4; UKCES, 2009b). Furthermore, even in those businesses that did train, the training that was done was identified as mostly unaccredited, and disproportionately weighted towards those with existing higher levels of skills and qualification attainment (Strategy Unit, 2002:12; DfES, 2005a; Leitch, 2006:50). In interviews, policy-makers offered an explanation of this behaviour as both representing the ‘bad bosses’ wanton disregard of lower-skilled workers as disposable and replaceable, and as serving to restrict the low-skilled workers employability potential in the wider labour market.

*“If they’re not an enlightened employer or anything it’s because they don’t want that person to be promotable elsewhere. It’s a protection; it’s like a handcuff. They’re handcuffing them into that organisation.” (Policy-maker 4)*

By undervaluing skills and low-skilled employees, policy-makers depicted ‘irresponsible’ businesses as the cause of the low skills problem.

In addition, policy-makers’ narratives described a widespread lack of appetite to train among individuals (Leitch, 2006:2; PIU, 2001:35). In contrast to ‘inert’ individuals, portrayed as harbouring

latent progressive skills aspirations but facing barriers to training and learning, these irresponsible individuals were painted as having more deviant reasons – such as *“lack of interest”* (Leitch, 2006:106) - for not engaging in their own skills development. Policy rhetoric insisted on the need for individuals to recognise their private responsibility with regard to skills development, but in addition, to realise the extent to which they hold back aspirational businesses from developing the high(er) skills needed to stay competitive in dynamic economic conditions (Leitch, 2005:6). Policy documents pointed to employers’ persistent experience of skills deficiencies and shortages within their workforce and within the wider labour market that they recruit from (Leitch, 2005:6; Leitch, 2006:41)<sup>11</sup>, as evidence of what they described to be the insufficient attention paid by these types of employees to their skill level.

In response to ‘bad bosses’ and ‘bad workers’, New Labour presented a role of the state to **exhort** the need for changed behaviours, and therefore mitigate the effect of lack of demand for skills. Given what they identified as ‘irresponsible’ lack of skills aspiration, policy rhetoric urged these employers and employees to accept the obligation to alter their attitudes. In contrast to the portrayal of a high(er) skills consensus (whether manifest or latent) that either needed to be empowered or enhanced, ‘irresponsible’ businesses and individuals were described as needing to be checked and brought in line by the state (HM Treasury, 2002:20). Indeed, policy-makers presented a co-existing role for government to *“inform people that they’re morally responsible”* (Policy-maker 4) for skills development.

Businesses were described as required to *“play their part”* by *“raising their engagement in skills at all levels and using skills effectively”* (Leitch, 2006:87); and to turn their backs on the exploitative deviance of operating in low skills equilibrium. Furthermore, and in support of the needs of UK plc’, policy rhetoric urged employers to take responsibility for the broader career development opportunities of their employees (HM Treasury, 2002:20). To investing in ‘portable skills’ and ‘accredited training’ (Leitch, 2006:88) because, in the context of economic uncertainty, they recognised their ‘social’ responsibilities extended beyond their immediate business needs.

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<sup>11</sup> The NESS 2005 (cited in Leitch, 2006) reported one in four vacancies as ‘hard to fill’ due to the skills deficiencies of applicants, and 1.3 million employees as not fully proficient in their job.

*“You know, we want the business to do better if we have [employees] better skilled and everything else, but also to understand exactly what it means if they fall on hard times [...] that they’ve equally got a responsibility there” (Policy-maker 1).*

Similarly, individuals were urged to change their behaviour; *“demanding more of themselves”* (Leitch, 2006:17), to ensure they could *“play their part in a shared mission for world class skills”* (Leitch, 2006:22). Policy emphasised the need for them to *“feel that it is their responsibility to improve their skills throughout their lives”* (DIUS, 2007a:7), and to *“take responsibility for their personal career development, and be prepared to learn new skills”* (HM Treasury, 2002:20).

However, running alongside strong exhortation for businesses and individuals to change their behaviour, was the fundamental axiom – common to voluntarist systems - that governments cannot compel the actions of private actors. Given the absence of a strong commitment to compulsion<sup>12</sup>, there was a clear sense that where businesses and individuals refrained from changing their behaviours the inevitable consequences of declining productivity/profitability and employability was not the responsibility of the state.

*“You can lose your workforce or you can retain it. You can build your business to the next level or stay there and die. So it’s hard economics, and it’s not the government’s job to sustain low level business at all.” (Policy-maker 2)*

*“The Government cannot promise people jobs for life. Nor can we promise to meet the cost of all the training and learning that people need. Individuals have to play their part, in terms of motivation, engagement and financial investment” (DfES, 2005a:17)*

In such cases, policy rhetoric described a role for the state and the skills providers to circumventing the ramifications of this deviant lack of demand; functioning ‘behind-the-scenes’ on behalf of, and in order to **emancipate**, the vulnerable other party in the employment relationship.

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<sup>12</sup> Although earlier policy documents did not rule out the possibility of enforcing a minimum level of engagement with training at the workplace, and the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) recommended revisiting the case for compulsion should adequate progress towards the 2020 ambition not be made on a voluntary basis (a recommendation that provided an ever present threat to incentivise the urged need for changed behaviours), these recommendations were uttered tentatively, and were invariably closely followed by a list of reservations about the effectiveness of any such measures and mechanisms (Leitch, 2006:94; DIUS, 2007a:44; Policy-maker 1; Policy-maker 2).

In short, this version of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England was depicted as the means to free the progressive aspirations of disempowered individuals from the bondage of the ‘bad boss’ in the low-skills business, or the means by which businesses could free their progressive aspirations, otherwise suffocated by the indolence of the low-skilled ‘bad worker’.

In response to the image of the irresponsible business, the organisations associated with skills delivery were recast in policy rhetoric with a distinct role to overcome the ‘selfishness’ of the ‘bad boss’. Policy-makers described the LSC’s quality control function, Train to Gain brokers, and Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), as not just responding to what employers want, but as requiring them to undertake a more holistic review of the skills needs of their entire workforce; particularly their lower-skilled employees. Thus, brokerage was not just described in policy narratives as a means of empowering employers, but also as presenting “*a carrot and a stick*” (Policy-maker 1); preventing them from ‘cherry-picking’ their engagement with skills, and making full qualification attainment – in the interest of the vulnerable worker - a condition of receipt of funding.

The ‘Skills Pledge’ was introduced. Recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:4), it was described as a mechanism by which the leadership of a business could make a commitment to instigate a ‘new workplace partnership’ (DIUS, 2007a:54) by agreeing to train their workforce to a minimum of NVQ level 2 (DIUS, 2007a:53; DIUS, 2008b:9); and as a way for government to measure commitment towards the ‘2020 ambition’. Successive policy documents made reference to and commend the increasing number of ‘good’ employers who had signed up, thereby seeking to implicitly shame and stigmatise those deviant enough to continue to resist the pressure to reform their attitudes.

In addition, New Labour consulted on and introduced a statutory right for employees to request time off for training, known as ‘time to train’, and presented it as a way of “*giving all employees in England a right to a serious conversation with their employer about their skills development*” (DIUS, 2008b:4). A means for vulnerable employees, denied access to training in the past, to “*make demands at the workplace*” (Policy-maker 2) in relation to their own skills development (DIUS, 2008b:11).

The introduction of Individual Skills Accounts (and the associated IAG) was likewise presented as giving disempowered employees back agency and leverage over their own circumstances. Giving

them ‘control’ in skills decision-making as a result of having options to “*develop their careers away from their existing employer or alongside their current jobs*” (Leitch, 2006:24; see also DIUS, 2007a:27; DfES, 2003:17). In this way, this version of the Skills Strategy withdrew further from taking responsibility for the inevitable failure of irresponsible businesses, and instead sought to operate ‘behind-the-scenes’ to enable vulnerable workers to circumvent the lack of demand for skill displayed by their deviant employer. It sought to help develop and enhance their progressive aspirations, and ultimately ensure means by which they could reposition themselves more favourably in relation to the better functioning parts of the labour market. As one policy-maker succinctly explained,

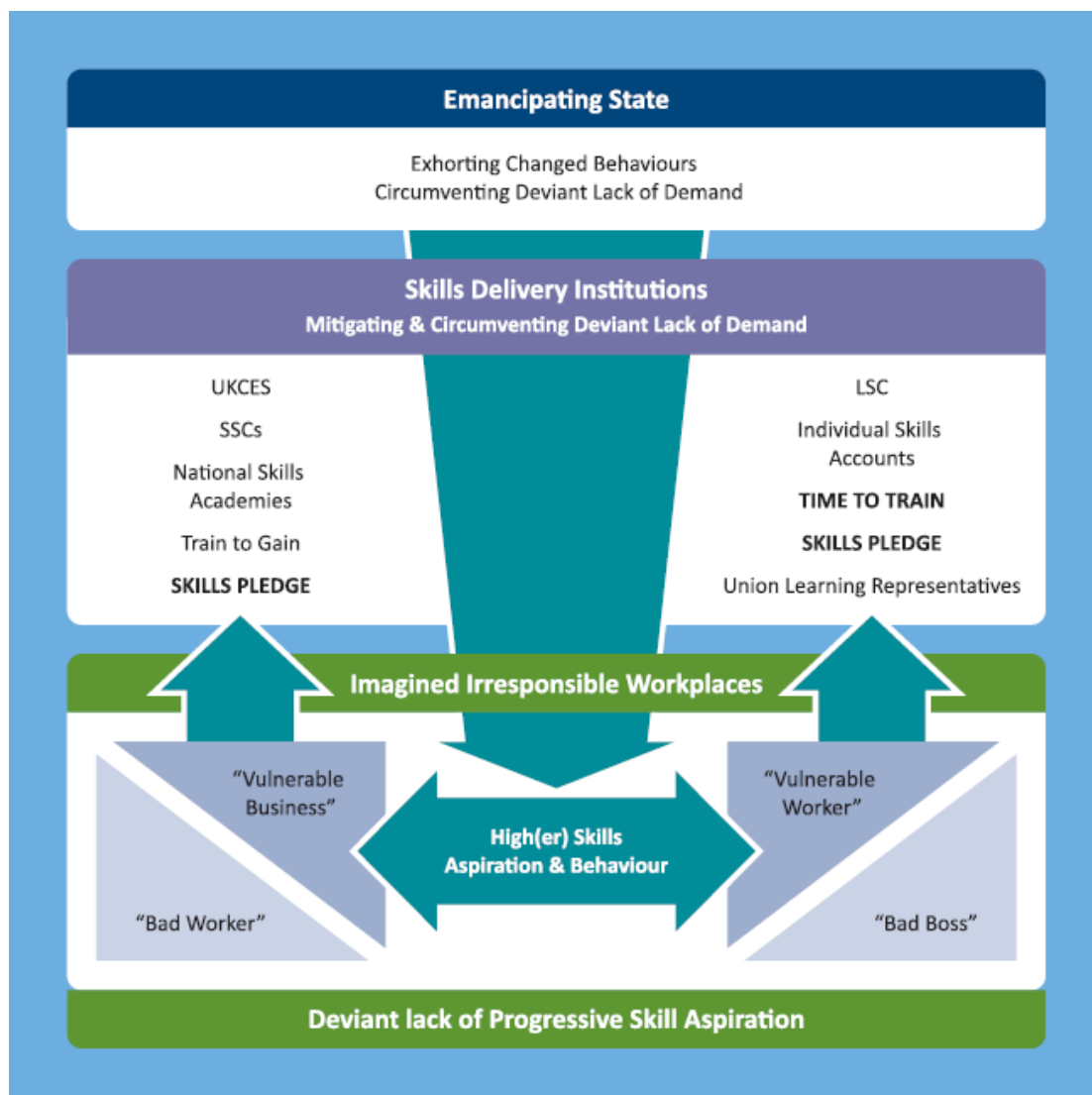
*“I don’t think anyone’s going to regulate call centres to say you have to have an NVQ. There are call centre qualifications, but I don’t think anyone’s going to regulate and say you have to do that. And people, I’m sure, get treated extremely badly in some of them. Is the objective of skills policy to get them treated better? Probably not, but the objective of the Skills Strategy might well be to give them the qualifications so they can choose not to be employed there anymore” (Policy-maker 3)*

Equally, in response to the image of the ‘bad worker’ the institutions and mechanisms of skills delivery were reconceptualised and described as functioning to overcome indolence, and release the ambitions of businesses from the suffocating burden of their employees lack of skills aspiration. The role of brokerage as part of the Train to Gain offer was recast in policy rhetoric as serving to raise employers’ awareness of the skills shortages they face by diagnosing the deficiencies within their existing workforce; raising awareness of the implications of these deficiencies; and identifying relevant, economically valuable, education and training programmes that met their business need (Leitch, 2006:91; DIUS, 2008b:6). Elevating this “*economic mission*” (DfES, 2006:5) to the centre of the skills strategies aims, was described as a way of giving employers’ back ‘control’ (Leitch, 2006: 82) over skills decision making, and as again emancipating them from the lack of demand for skills amongst irresponsible individuals. Finally, policy-makers narratives also reconceptualised the Skills Pledge from a commitment by employers to train their low-skilled employees, to a statement of intention made by employers to set the tone in relation to what is expected of low-skilled employees. Employers were described as being able to use the Pledged commitment to drive up skills, productivity and performance in the workplace (DIUS, 2008b:9).



Overall then, the last of three strategies for skills for England under New Labour can be identified as a distinct agenda to **mitigate and circumvent lack of demand** for skills. Based on the articulation of workplaces as producing vulnerabilities, the governmental project was re-described as exhorting betterness, or ‘working behind the scenes’ to emancipate the victimised party in the employment relationship (either individuals working for ‘bad bosses’ or businesses burdened by ‘bad workers’). This ordering of relations between workplaces, the state and the institutions of skills delivery, and the system of organisation for the governance of high(er) skills, is armed with justification narratives associated with the promotion of a (particular type of social justice) or greater economic prosperity, respectively. It is summarised below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: The strategy for mitigating and circumventing lack of demand**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

## Conclusions and implications

This paper identified a paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, captured in the tension between a *demand-led* strategy for skills, and a strategy wherein *demand was to be led by the state*. This tension was unable to be fully accounted for as a straightforward continuation of the chronic affliction that besets skills policymaking in England; that successive governments' have constructed and managed the role of education and training in service to the needs and demands of the economy, without challenging actually-existing low employer demand for skills (Keep & Mayhew, 1996; Keep, 2002; Keep 2006). Indeed, any analysis of 'business-as-usual' demand-side voluntarism and supply-side managerialism problematically writes-off the elements of New Labour's policy rhetoric that carved out and constructed a role for the state to lead skills demand.

In contrast, we have argued that it is essential not to under-theorise the ambiguity and messiness of state projects and state work. Any endeavour to engage with New Labour's contribution to skill policy in England must be understood as framed within a broader commitment to a hybrid 'Third Way' reconciliation of social democratic and neo-liberal convictions (Fairclough, 2000; Newman, 2001), and remain open to the ways in which rhetorical claims of policy coherence mask the incoherence of multiple political rationalities (Newman, 2005).

Indeed, we have shown that within what is framed as a "*coherent approach*" (Foreword by Tony Blair – PIU, 2001:3), New Labour articulated three distinct strategies for governing skills. These distinct strategies were determined, in the first instance, by the degree to which imagined workplaces were perceived to have progressive high(er) skills aspirations. More specifically, we have argued that these identified distinct skills strategies for England represented state work to *categorise* different images of workplaces that *justified* different ways of ordering and organising 'the doing of skills'. State work that involved assembling the component parts of the skills project into distinct architectures of high(er) skills governance – the operational dimension of skills policy – in relation to how the problem of low skills was articulated – the formal dimension of skills policy (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003).

In the different strategies the ordering of relations between the parties in the Skills Strategy and the role of the state changes, as the differently imagined workplaces are brought into alignment

with and engaged in differently imagined state projects to 'empower', 'enhance' or 'emancipate' better economic and social functioning. In effect, parties in the Skills Strategy encounter a different 'type' of state and state work, depending on how they are imagined; state work to retain the prerogative of employers and employees to make education and training decisions for themselves, so long as they are the 'right' high(er) skills decisions, or, if not, a project to change the skills aspirations and fortunes of workplaces. This leads to the same policy tools being re-described in policy rhetoric as having very different functions. For example, Train to Gain is described as both a way to support employer empowerment and deliver the skills they demand, and as a way for brokers and skills providers to encourage inert businesses and require irresponsible business to change their offer of training to employees. By offering such an account of the source and cause of paradox, the central argument is that the governance of skills under New Labour can be explained and understood as an attempt at **'state-steered' voluntarism** through the co-existence of three distinct strategic regimes.

However, whilst this three-fold skills strategy seemingly served the purpose of containing multiple policy objectives at once and creating a graded role for state action, it was also prone to being used selectively by those with vested interests in UK skills policy. For example, the representatives of businesses and employers (e.g. the Confederation of British Industries, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses), and the representatives of employees and learners (e.g. the Trade Union Congress, Unionlearn and the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education).. In fact, elsewhere (Durrant, 2012) we have shown that employers' and employees' seize the opacity written into the policy to rearrange roles and responsibilities according to their own interests, and ultimately to derail any (albeit discursively constructed) roles and responsibility that policy rhetoric places on them to uprate their training and skilling aspirations and behaviours. This may account, in part, for why the New Labour Skills Strategy seems not to have had the intended effect on employer training efforts (Green *et al*, 2013; Mason & Bishop, 2010).

The implications for policy of this analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England are therefore also associated with the 'problem of policy opacity'. Arguably the recognition that state policies to 'empower', 'enhance', and 'emancipate' economic competitiveness and better social functioning are different projects and should be treated as such. Even if we accept the broad contention that high(er) skills are to be about the ability to cope in conditions of dynamic economic uncertainty - an acceptance replete with all the problems of who and what this logic

privileges, particularly given the inequality of starting positions - then entangling and collapsing the normative distinction between 'good', 'bad', and frankly 'ugly' workplaces disrupts and derails policy intentions.

## Appendix 1: Index of core documents: the New Labour 'Skills Strategy' (for England)

| Title of Document   | Author                           | Type of Document                       | Date |
|---|----------------------------------|--|------|
| In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century   | PIU                              | Report                                 | 2001 |
| In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century – part 2  | Strategy Unit                    | Report                                 | 2002 |
| Developing Workforce Skills: Piloting a new approach  | HM Treasury                      | Report                                 | 2002 |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising Our Potential – Individuals, Employers, Nation                         | DfES                             | White Paper                            | 2003 |
| Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 1   | DfES                             | White Paper                            | 2005 |
| Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 2   | DfES                             | White Paper                            | 2005 |
| Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 3   | DfES                             | White Paper                            | 2005 |
| Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances   | DfES                             | White Paper                            | 2006 |
| Leitch Review of Skills - Skills in the UK: The long term challenge   | Leitch<br>( <i>HM Treasury</i> ) | Commissioned Report:<br>Interim Report | 2005 |
| Leitch Review of Skills - Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills                            | Leitch<br>( <i>HM Treasury</i> ) | Commissioned Report:<br>Final Report   | 2006 |
| World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England   | DIUS                             | White Paper                            | 2007 |
| Time to Train: Consulting on a new right to request time to train for employees in England                        | DIUS                             | Consultation Document                  | 2008 |
| Shaping the future: a new adult advancement and careers service for England                                       | DIUS                             | Prospectus                             | 2008 |
| Raising Expectations: Enabling the system to deliver  | DCSF & DIUS                      | Consultation Document                  | 2008 |
| Train to Gain: A plan for growth – November 2007-July 2011  | LSC                              | Report                                 | 2007 |
| Empowering Employers: Building Employer Influence - Relicensing Sector Skills Councils                            | UKCES                            | Guidance Document                      | 2008 |
| Empowering SSCs: Employer driven skills reform across the UK - A Relicensing Framework for Sector Skills Councils | UKCES                            | Guidance Document                      | 2008 |

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